

THE CENTER FOR HONEYBEE RESEARCH

~A Local Network Laying the Groundwork to Expand~

North Carolina has one of the highest concentrations of beekeepers in the country, mostly small-scale producers and hobbyists. So it's no surprise that a grassroots organization dedicated to natural beekeeping would spring up in North Carolina. Currently, the Center for Honey Bee Research (CHBR) is largely local but Carl Chesick, its President, along with CHBR's board is carefully laying the groundwork for their vision of a national-scale research collaborative.

Carl Chesick and his wife Joan have been gardening and farming in North Carolina for 27 years. Starting in 1984 with a ¼ acre garden, they now have expanded to 7 acres dedicated to vegetables, fruit, nuts, and honey on Green Goddess Farm. Honey bees first drew Carl's interest in 2003 after a conversation with a neighboring beekeeper about the alarming crash in bee populations. Carl says

That's when I first really put two and two together in terms of the pollination that honey bees do and the affect it has on crops. I had been noticing a large number of my cucumbers were deformed and misshapen and I'd always assumed it was from disease or maybe something missing from the soil. But I learned that to be properly pollinated, a cucumber flower must be visited 11 different times by a pollinator and if it doesn't get that, the fruit won't be properly formed.

Each year the Buncombe County Beekeepers Club offered free Bee School for beginners, and Carl says "so I figured I'd go to Bee School and learn all there was to it!" After a few months with his new hive, Carl

discovered that his hive had died and what he had proudly assumed was the busy comings-and-goings of his bees was in reality the comings-and-

After attending the same classes at the Bee School for several seasons, Carl began to see the need for the club to offer an advanced bee



Beekeepers brought nucleus colonies with mite-resistant stock to western North Carolina. Photo taken by NC Master Beekeeper Diane Almond, 2011.

goings of bees from elsewhere who were happily robbing his hive. He realized that beekeeping might be more complicated than he'd originally thought.

In the Bee School classes Carl was shocked by the emphasis on pesticide treatments coming from the instructors. Early on, Carl and Joan decided to try out beekeeping without pesticides, and all his mentors predicted that the hive would die within a few weeks or months at the most. Despite mite levels more than double the threshold that the experts said required pesticide treatment, Carl and Joan's hive survived not only the next few months, but the next three years. With this success and consistently low loss rates, he drew other local beekeepers interested in natural methods.

school, and hopefully one with an emphasis on natural beekeeping. He envisioned inviting honeybee researchers, breeders, and experts from the greater North Carolina region and across the country, from Arizona to Wyoming to Florida and France. There was some resistance from parts of the Buncombe County Bee Club, but with persistence Carl won enough support to push ahead and the first expanded bee school took place in 2006.

The first obstacle to the advanced beekeeping conference was cost. The Bee Club asked local businesses to buy sponsorships for \$250. In return, the company's name would appear on the conference's website and programs. The sponsoring businesses could count the expense as advertising and therefore deduct the expense from their taxes, even though the

Beekeepers Conference did not yet have their status as a 501(c)3 non-profit.

With conference attendance reaching 175-200 people each year, it became apparent that the conference was large enough to become its own entity. The Buncombe County Beekeepers Chap-

Ambassador, Lady Spirit Moon, traveled to Italy in 2011 to establish relationships with the country's major beekeeping organizations, honey cooperatives and bee experts working on small-cell foundation and varroa mite research. Having this national and international network of contacts is es-

researchers, the CHBR would design an experimental model that could be easily replicated and implemented by volunteers. Volunteers would be trained to appropriately manage experimental hives at sites scattered throughout the area, and to record detailed data. This all would require grant funding to supply the equipment and materials (queens, combs, and hives) as well as to hire a Project Coordinator to train volunteers and oversee the research.

Though the Center for Honeybee Research has made great strides already, the Center continues to face many challenges to establishing a research collaborative. Among these challenges are finding enough appropriate bee stock and chemical-free comb for large-scale trials, securing funding, and coordinating and training a volunteer labor force. However, Carl and the CHBR's board are carefully laying a solid foundation to for a successful endeavor. Carl says

Right now we are a local network, but that is not our final goal. We hope to expand to the region and then nationally. We have a big vision, but we're taking small steps, trying to put the building blocks in place. We want to build credibility and grow carefully, to make something that will last.

For more information, visit www.CHBR.org ■



The panel of judges and the winning entries of the 2011 Black Jar Honey Contest.

ter appointed Carl to create and incorporate a full-fledged non-profit that became the Center for Honeybee Research. The CHBR was officially incorporated in December of 2010, and was officially approved for 501(c)3 tax exempt status in August 2011.

In 2011, the CHBR launched a Black Jar Honey Contest where local honey is tasted and judged by a panel of local leaders of the local food movement, including chefs, journalists, and non-profit and business leaders. The hope is that the contest will raise awareness about local honey, and help expand the market for small scale beekeepers.

The CHBR's central activity remains the annual conference in Asheville, North Carolina –the theme for 2011 is “What turns bees on” – which continues to attract leading experts in the field. The conference is both an opportunity for learning and chance to build relationships with experts. The CHBR is reaching out to bee experts internationally as well. The CHBR's

sential for the Center's larger goal of establishing a collaborative research network.

In a collaborative research network several individuals and institutions combine resources to conduct an agreed upon experiment that would not be possible to conduct by any of the participants alone because of time, space or financial constraints. The Center for Honeybee Research would aim to address gaps in the honey bee research by capitalizing on the resources available. Carl says “We have 600 beekeepers in Buncombe County, that's a lot of motivated people. If we could mobilize even a fraction of those, we'd have all the volunteer manpower necessary.”

To begin with CHBR would select a question to investigate. In Carl's words, the question chosen “should be something basic, but novel. It should be something important and relevant to beekeepers.” Then in consultation with their network of preeminent bee